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abroad in the world. He was the poet who encouraged the revolutionary spirit in the world, and sang odes of liberation of its people. The praise of Japan in the first instance represented the views of a wide-awake, and politically conscious man, who saw in Japanese nationalism the desire of the people of that country to manage their own affairs, without let or hindrance by the nations of the West. But when Jap nationalism became aggressive Rabindranath's views changed accordingly.

It would be said that if Rabindranath saw Nippon changing after the first world war, why did he not actively associate himself with some movement aimed at uprooting Jap militarism and other such isms in the world, closely allied to aggressive ideology of the Nippon ?

That was of course what happened. That was the goal of every revolutionary poet of an epoch fraught with dynamic change.

And that is what could not happen if Rabindranath were the old-fashioned poet looking at the political world with detached amusement !

But a mighty conflict raged in the mind of the Poet, as to his future role in the world of political action. He had established Santiniketan with the aim of giving light and learning to India, but he knew that it could not be an institution exclusively devoted to learning and indifferent to the fate of the wide world. It must keep pace with the

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TAGORE ON CHINA AND JAPAN

*by* HIRA LAL SETH



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## I Visiting Nippon

Unlike the present war, when from the very beginning admission into Japan has been restricted, and the only place where a foreign visitor determined to find out the truth could land is the concentration camp kept ready by the Jap police for undesirable foreigners—in the last war the foreigners visiting Nippon had not to hazard such risks and could roam about the country unscathed, and even enjoy, the wonder of it, freedom of speech at all times denied to Japanese people. Tagore was one of such care-free visitors to Japan who toured the land of the Nippon right in the midst of the last war. He was going to America, and he broke his journey in Japan. He met his countrymen in Tokyo. These men had become more or less the “sons of the soil” in Japan, or were naturalised as citizens enjoying the same rights as the Japanese. But lest the Japanese should bamboozle them in accepting all the unfamiliar credos of their militarism, Tagore gave them a piece

of his mind, and told them what he thought of Nippon.

He admitted their military strength, and noted the fact that they had progressed by leaps and bounds in a short period, or as Nehru would put it "bounded up with an amazing speed."

"I have come to discover something very great in the character of Japan. I am not blind to their faults. You may remember that when I first came to this part of the world I wrote a number of lectures upon Nationalism, which I read in the United States of America. The reason why these thoughts came to me in Japan was because it was here that I first saw the Nation in all its naked ugliness, whose spirit we orientals have borrowed from the West.

"It came vividly before my eyes, because on the one hand there were the real people of Japan, producing wonderful works of art, and in the details of their life giving expression to inherited codes of social behaviour and honour the spirit of Bushido: on the other hand, in contrast to the living side of the people was the spirit of the Nation, arrogantly proud, suffering from one obsession, that it was different from all other Asiatic peoples."

Such was the maddening contrast of Japan. Its progress and moderation were fascinating and seductive, but there was also arrogance and "the Nation in all its ugliness." The Japanese believed themselves to be

“different,” having “sprung straight from the loins of the gods.” Why did they believe like that? Why did Colonel Bushido assume the airs of Field-Marshal Bragdaccio? Tagore thought Japanese had gained in strength, but they had not digested this newly won power:

“Japan was faced with the most difficult trial of suddenly being startled into power and prosperity and has begun to show all the teeth and claws of the Nation which have been demoralising the civilised world, spreading far and wide an appalling amount of cruelty and deception. I could not specially blame Japan for this, but I heartily deplore the fact that she, with her code of honour, her ideal of perfection and her belief in the need for grace in everyday life, could yet become infected with this epidemic of selfishness and with the boastfulness of egotism.”

Having said as much and holding the views he did about Japan, Tagore could not escape censure of the Japanese people. They did not like this “sermonising” from him, and thought he was only misleading them from the path which the leaders of their country had chalked out for them. How did he react to such criticism?

“I frankly confess that I was then deeply mortified. For, though the people of Japan on this first occasion accepted me with enthusiastic welcome in the beginning, yet directly they came to know the ideas that I had, they felt nervous. They thought idealism would weaken their morale; that ideals were not for

those nations who must be unscrupulously strong; that the Nation must never have any feelings of disgust from the handling of diplomatic filth, or of shrinking from the use of weapons of brutal power. Human victims had to be sought, and the Nation had to be enriched with plunder.

“Nevertheless, I did not blame Japan for considering me to be dangerous. Though I felt the hurt of this evil yet at the same time I knew that beneath the iron mailcoat of the Nation the living spirit of the people had been working in secret. Today I feel sure that these people have the promise of a great future, though that may not be evident in the facts of the present.

“I deem myself fortunate in having noted certain characteristic truths in the Japanese race, which I believe will work through their sub-conscious mind and one day produce great results in a luminous revelation of their soul. It fills me almost with envy at their profound feeling for beauty, their calm sense of perfection that is expressed in various ways in their daily conduct, the constant exercise of patience of a strength which revels in the fashioning of exquisite behaviour with a self-control that is almost spiritual in its outward expression. It has required strenuous discipline and centuries of civilisation. I shall have to confess that the Japanese possess a monopoly of certain elements of heroism—heroism which is one with their artistic genius. In its essence, it has a strong

energy of movement ; in its form, it has that perfect proportion which comes of self-mastery. It is a creation of two opposing forces that of expression and that of repression."

In spite of the widespread resentment in Japan, awakened as a result of Rabindranath's views, the latter was not distraught. He expressed the hope that Japan would be one day redeemed by its better self. The rest of his peroration to his countrymen in Japan underlined this idea. He thought Japan would give up its militarism, nay even urged the Japanese people to renounce the cult of militarism.

"Japan must prove to the world that the present utilitarian spirit may be wedded to beauty. If science and art, necessity and joy, the machine and life are once united, that will be a great day. At present science is shamelessly dissociated from art. She is a barbarian, boastful of her immense muscle and superficial nature. But has she not come at last to the gate of the Truth, which gives us the mystery of the Beautiful ?

"Though we often find in Japan of to-day a hysteria of violence in her politics, an unscrupulous greed in her commerce, and an undignified lack of reticence in her public life, which makes us anxious for the moment, yet let us feel certain that all these have been borrowed from outside, that they have no deep root in her mind. Let us hope that the truth which they have in their inner being

will work through all contradictions and express itself through unaccountable ways in some sudden outbreak of revelation.

“Great periods of history are periods of eruption, unlooked for, and seemingly against the times, but they have all along been cradled in the dark chamber of the people’s inner nature. The ugly spirit of the market has come from across the sea into the beautiful land of Japan. It may, for the time, find its lodging in the guest-house of the people; but their home will ultimately banish it. For it is a menace to the genius of her race, a sacrilege to the best that she has attained, and must keep safe not only for her own salvation, but the glory of all humanity.”

Needless to say that these great expectations of Tagore were never realised. Japan did not give up militarism, nor the spirit of the market. As a matter of fact, before that war ended, Japan had grabbed her own share of the booty, and quietly occupied the German possessions in the Pacific and in China. As for the spirit of the market, the period between the two wars was noted for commercial expansion of the Japanese. They flooded the markets of China, Indo-China, Thailand, East Indies, Burma and India with their goods, and enriched themselves at the expense of these countries. Is it any wonder then that Tagore should recant his hastily uttered views about adaptability of the Japanese to the ideas of a better world order based on justice, freedom and peace? This

very speech formed the subject of his comment twenty-two years later in 1938, when he discussed his past views about Japan in a letter to his friend, resident in that country. He wrote :

“ This (belief in change of Japanese attitude towards militarism) was in 1916 when some of the great nations in Europe went mad in their mutual destruction, and I fondly hoped that such a defamation of humanity could never happen in that beautiful country inhabited by a people who had inherited their ancient tradition of heroism that is chivalrous, a perfect combination of beauty and manliness. Though I had my glimmer of doubt yet I felt sure that the whole mind of this people would indignantly reject the hideousness that shamelessly unmasked itself in Europe at that murderous moment, the ruthless display of barbarity indulging in indiscriminate man-slaughter, using torturous weapons finished in laboratory cowardly in their mechanical efficiency and soulless ravage, revealing a diabolical callousness in their deliberate destruction of centres of culture with scientific abominations rained from the sky. I could never dream in those not very distant days that I should ever have woefully to revise my estimate of the greatness of this people whose co-operation we had eagerly expected in building up of a noble future in Asia by their sympathy and true love of freedom at this period of changing scenes in world history

when the lamp of Europe in its last flicker seems to produce more poisonous fume than flame."

Thus the Japanese finally lost the sympathy of a man, who was in the beginning a friendly critic of their regime, and who was of all Indians best equipped to interpret Japan to this country, having imbibed the Japanese culture ; and expressed admiration for their past civilisation. Tagore became implacably hostile to Japan.



## II

### The Poet and the Man of Action

Rabindranath had been alternately pleased and annoyed with Japan. It may be said that as a poet who had drunk the Japanese culture to the dregs, he had been first impressed with the achievements of the Nippon, then alarmed at his intransigence, and finally disillusioned with his militaristic spirit and had in wrath hit out at the Japanese, and given them a piece of his mind. Just like a poet—his critics would say—to extol the Japanese first to the skies, and then hurl them on the ground.

But Tagore had not looked at Japan as an old-fashioned poet, with high tinge of emotionalism, and only remotely associated with the political thought of the day. It was not a will-o'-the-wisp idea of his first to praise Japan and then denounce it. He did not look at the world from his poetic window, with an air of superiority and detached amusement. He was the mainstay of the movement for global freedom and global unity against militarist-chauvinist spirit